

Conspiracy theories assembly

I wonder if you can work out what it is that links all of these different and varied ideas?

Aliens have arrived on earth and have been interacting with the American government, who covered up evidence of a crashed spaceship at Roswell. The world is secretly run by a small group of alien shape shifting lizards. The world is secretly run by a shadowy group of evil geniuses, called The Illuminati. The moon landings never happened, and all of the footage was faked. Donald Trump is leading a secret war against an evil liberal elite.

Yes, I have no doubt that you will have long ago realised that I am sharing a list of conspiracy theories.

These are just a small sample of the many that are out there. They all seem to follow a general pattern, where some small group is acting in pursuit of a secret evil plan. That plan is often achieved by the clever manipulation of others. Any serious reflection would show these theories are nonsense. So why do so many people believe conspiracy theories? What on earth is the attraction? And why do they seem to be so many more at the moment?

I think there are a number of factors that make conspiracy theories attractive. The first is that these theories make the world seem less full of chance, less prone to random acts. It is more attractive to believe that the world is being secretly controlled (even if it is by bad people) than to believe that some things happen for no particular reason. This is the same feeling that makes thrillers and detective stories so attractive - they operate in a world where everything is significant and meaningful. The second attraction to conspiracy theories is linked to the first. The believers follow the theory because they want to believe that the world is controllable; that it can be manipulated and bent to the will of individuals. Those attracted to conspiracy theories are also likely to be those who distrust science and logical thinking. As science has become more and more specialist and difficult, fewer and fewer people understand it. They feel alienated and powerless and from that position it is but a short step to deny the importance of rationality. Finally, conspiracy theories thrive best where there is the most fear and anxiety.

Conspiracy theories are always unhelpful and damaging, but especially so in a moment like the COVID pandemic. It should come as no surprise when people feel powerless, when science has never been more important, when fear and anxiety are multiplied, that conspiracy theories thrive as never before. Some claim that the disease is no worse than the flu, and there has been a terrible overreaction. Others claim that the disease does not exist at all, and has been invented by politicians and the medical profession. A final group, perhaps the most dangerous of all, do not deny the existence of the disease, but urge us to refuse the vaccine that prevents it.

These are voices that should be heard: I am never in favour of silencing debate. However, these arguments should be dragged into the light of rationality and exposed for the dangerous frauds that they are. Someone once said that conspiracy theories are attractive to idiots because they make the fools who fall for them feel intelligent. That's harsh. I think they are attractive because so many people are frightened and despondent at the moment, and wish to externalise their negative feelings by blaming others.

If I am right about conspiracy theories there is a way to intellectually vaccinate ourselves against their allure. We are at our most resistant when we feel confident and powerful. We can hold them at bay if we accept that not everything happens because someone else made it happen. We should embrace science, logic and enlightenment thinking. Finally, we must confront, challenge and overcome our fears and anxieties.

The truth is, no one is secretly ruling the world. That is, up to this point. Maybe my final message this morning is one of slightly cheeky encouragement. If someone has to rule the world, then let it be you. Go out there and change things for the better. Find ways to become the decision-maker, the person in charge. Bend the world to your will. But let's not be the baddies. If things in society improve, it is because small groups of people like us worked together to make it so. Gentlemen, let's stage a kindly take over.